

URL: <https://ecorner.stanford.edu/clips/building-a-partnership-as-co-ceos/>

Splendid Spoon co-CEO Elise Densborn explains how she and co-CEO Nicole Centeno have built a trusting partnership. She gives examples and advice from their experiences evolving with their business, navigating transitions and conflicts, and deciding how to approach decisions.



## Transcript

Elise Densborn I mentioned building trust, 00:00:04,139 and fundamentally that is like absolutely a necessary element of partnership.. I think we know all know that from our own experiences and any type of partnership or relationship, whether it's at work or at home, trust is like absolutely foundational and key.. And so we work really hard at that and have worked really hard at that, both through time, right, and just working together and building that sort of rhythm, but also transparency and vulnerability and being really like honest and uncomfortable and sharing our thoughts and our experience and not being afraid to say what you really think.. I think a lot of sort of the initial aha moments for us, I think where Nicole really saw a partner in me, and not to speak for her, but this is like, this is something she's shared with me is one of an early like moment we had where I was like, "We need to change this immediately or else like the business viability is in question." And she was like, "You know, I just respected so much to have somebody tell me that directly and like fearlessly." And so that I think established a lot of trust for us.. It also just means really strong communication skills and holding yourself and each other accountable to what you say you will do and not do and just be like open and gentle with each other when there are misses because there definitely are, there are definitely fumbles.. We're moving very quickly.. And when you say bumps in the road, like what are some examples of that? A lot of that has to do actually with the different stages of the business.. Like as the business evolves and needs different things, our roles actually evolve, too.. So people are often like, "What does you do and what does she do?" And it's actually not that static.. It's fairly dynamic and it kind of depends on the season..

So if we're in fundraising season, she might be like mostly externally-focused and I'm fully internally-focused and I'm sort of like running the day-to-day.. If we're in sort of like an innovation and building cycle, we may sort of divide and conquer the inside and be, she'll be a little bit more hands-on on things like innovation and sort of like brand philosophy, and I'll sort of connect the dots cross-functionally and all of those things.. So it really just kind of depends.. And I would say like our bumps have been when we're going through those transition phases, if we're not communicating effectively, if we're not like, and or acknowledging like that this transition is happening, at least for me, I'm often like, I just need us to like talk about it and make sure that we're like on the same page and move like sort of rowing in the same direction.. But we've never had any sort of like complete meltdown fights.. It's always just been sort of the typical stuff in any sort of working relationship.. You also, I think like tactically, you really do have to align on sort of what decisions you do need to make together and what decisions you don't.. And we sort of have this belief that there's only a handful of big decisions in a year that we need to like sit down,

pause, like really, really dive deep on together.. And then we give each other a lot of room and trust to move quickly if one of us isn't in the room and we work really hard to just bring the other one up to speed.. So we have a really strong discipline of like weekly syncs and touch-bases, but also just like keeping our egos in check and knowing when we actually need to be in the room or not and letting go when we don't and just saying, "I don't have to be a part of this every single time." And then I think the other thing that has been really like pivotal to our success is, having sort of like a clear language for conflict resolution..

We have like a practice framework across the organization of sort of like how to communicate through conflict and the framing and facts and judgements and asks and things of that nature.. And while Nicole and I don't typically sit down and like flow through our framework tool word for word, we do use that language.. Like it is sort of just this muscle we've built where you kind of know if those words are being invoked, you're trying to like negotiate through something a little bit sticky or debate through something where maybe there's divergent thinking...